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On a hazy Saturday morning, a 26-foot canoe carried a handful of inexperienced paddlers down a four-mile portion of the Des Plaines River.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, paddled in time with environmentalists who pointed out the river's features: wild birds, aged trees and navigable waters.

But to protect the Des Plaines from further decline, these experts also alerted the congressman to ways development is harming the river.

"Sixteen percent of water sources statewide are considered good," Kirk said. "Here in the Des Plaines watershed, 52 percent of water sources are good. That's the good part of this story. But in places like East St. Louis and Chicago, that average is lower."

The Des Plaines River has great potential as a recreational waterway, he believes.

"If we can start the process of removing dams and improving the water quality, we can have a first-class waterway within easy access of everyone in the 10th District," he said. "I hope more people will take advantage of opportunities to educate themselves on the kinds of issues we're facing."

Kirk and select members of his staff toured the waters between Route 176 and Route 60 with Andrea Moore, assistant director of the state Department of Natural Resources; Gary Mechanic, of the Des Plaines Watershed Alliance; and a representative of the Sierra Club, all of whom explained how the river's health and recreational value are being threatened.

"We're pleased the Congressman is paying attention to all of these issues," Mechanic said. "We've started work on a lot of things, but we need support and direction and encouragement from Congress to move forward more quickly."

One of the river's biggest hazards is flooding and the tremendous damage rising water causes to local wildlife and private property. The Army Corps of Engineers has designed a two-phase remedy to improve flood control and, in effect, the water quality in the Des Plaines River and its tributaries. The second phase of the Corps' plan also addresses improvements to the associated ecosystem.

Kirk requested \$4.78 million from the federal budget to finance the Corps' project. The Des Plaines River runs through much of the 10th District.

"Full funding of this project is the key federal, state and local priority for addressing flood problems and improving the quality of the Des Plaines River," Kirk said, "but we've got to make sure the state (financial) counterpart is there, too."

Beyond flooding, sewer overflows and urban runoff into the Des Plaines River watershed are major threats to the river's health. Chemical pesticides and fertilizers run from local lawns into the watershed, sending PCBs, copper, chromium, mercury, phosphorous and ammonium nitrates into the river.

"Suburbanites, I've learned, put eight times the amount of chemicals per acre onto their land as farmers do," Kirk said. "That means that our properties are more damaging to the river than the farms up north."

Outdated and damaged dams, however, are preventing game fish from getting that far north. These dams -- two in Lake County and seven in Cook -- also threaten the safety of those sportsmen who traverse them.

Dams are expensive to remove. But doing so would create a 480-mile paddleway in Illinois.

"Think about what an experience that would be for kids to have access to a 500 mile expedition," Kirk said. "Right now, there is no fishing for walleyes in Lake County, but there is in Will County."

Kirk traveled the Des Plaines in the Canot du Nord, a 26-foot replica of the canoes used by French fur traders in the 1600s. His trip coincided with the 330th anniversary of Joliet and Marquette's famous trip down the Des Plaines River, which linked the Atlantic Coast with the Mississippi River.